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Source: *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 8, Logic and Language (1994), pp. 1-16
Published by: Ridgeview Publishing Company
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2214160
Accessed: 28/09/2013 13:20

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Philosophical Perspectives, 8, Logic and Language, 1994

ESSENCE AND MODALITY

The Second *Philosophical Perspectives* Lecture

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The concept of essence has played an important role in the history and development of philosophy; and in no branch of the discipline is its importance more manifest than in metaphysics.

Its significance for metaphysics is perhaps attributable to two main sources. In the first place, the concept may be used to characterize what the subject, or at least part of it, is about. For one of the central concerns of metaphysics is with the identity of things, with what they are. But the metaphysician is not interested in every property of the objects under consideration. In asking 'What is a person?', for example, he does not want to be told that every person has a deep desire to be loved, even if this is in fact the case.

What then distinguishes the properties of interest to him? What is it about a property which makes it bear, in the metaphysically significant sense of the phrase, on what an object is? It is in answer to this question that appeal is naturally made to the concept of essence. For what appears to distinguish the intended properties is that they are essential to their bearers.

But the concept of essence is not merely of help in picking out the properties and concepts of interest to the metaphysician; it is itself one of those concepts. It plays not only an external role, in helping to characterize the subject, but also an internal role, in helping to constitute it. In one respect, this internal role is simply a consequence of the external one. For if a given property is essential, then so is the property of essentially having that property; and hence an interest in the given "lower level" property will transfer to an interest in the derived "higher level" property.

However, in addition to these derivative uses of the concept, there are other more significant uses. For the metaphysician may want to say that a person is essentially a person or that having a body is not essential to a person or that a person's essence is exhausted by his being a thing that thinks. And there is no

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natural way of seeing any of these claims as arising from some general essentialist function of a corresponding non-essentialist claim.

Furthermore, the concept is not only of use in the formulation of metaphysical claims; it is also of use in the definition of metaphysical concepts. An obvious example is the concept of an essential being; for an essential being is one whose essence includes its own existence. But there are other, less obvious, cases. Two, of great significance for the subject, are the concepts of substance and ontological dependence. For a substance (at least in one sense of the term) is something whose essence does not preclude it from existing on its own; and one object depends upon another (again in one sense of the term) if its essence prevents it from existing without the other object.

Given the importance of the concept of essence, it is not surprising that philosophers have attempted to get clearer on what it is; and as we survey their endeavours, we find that two main lines of thought have been pursued. On the one hand, essence as been conceived on the model of definition. It has been supposed that the notion of definition has application to both words and objects—that just as we may define a word, or say what it means, so we may define an object, or say what it is. The concept of essence has then taken to reside in the "real" or objectual cases of definition, as opposed to the "nominal" or verbal cases.

On the other hand, the concept has been elucidated in modal terms. It has been supposed that the notion of necessity may relate either to propositions or to objects—that not only may a proposition be said to be necessary, but also an object may be said to be necessarily a certain way. The concept of essence has then been located in the "de re", as opposed to the "de dicto", cases of modal attribution.

Both lines of thought go at least as far back as Aristotle. The definitional approach is trumpeted throughout his metaphysical writings; in the *Metaphysics* 1031a12, for example, he writes "clearly, then, definition is the formula of the essence". He does not, as far as I know, give a modal account of essence. But he does provide a modal account of two cognate notions. For his preferred definition of 'accident' is as 'something which may either belong or not belong to some self-same thing' (*Topics*, 102b6-7); and he follows Plato in taking things to be "prior and posterior...in respect of nature and substance" when the priors "can be without the other things, while the others cannot be without them" (*Metaphysics*, 1019a1-4).

Similar accounts, though sometimes with an admixture of both elements, recur throughout the history of philosophy. To take but two examples, Locke follows the definitional tradition in taking an essence of a thing to be "the being of any thing, whereby it is what it is" (*Essay*, Bk. 3, Ch. 3, §15), while Mill is closer to modal tradition in treating the essence of a thing as "that without which the thing could neither be, nor be conceived to be" (*System of Logic*, Bk. 1, chapter vi, §2).

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When we come to the contemporary period in analytic philosophy, we find that, as a result of a sustained empiricist critique, the idea of real definition has been more or less given up (unless it is taken to be vestigially present in the notion of a sortal). But the idea of understanding essence in terms of de re modality has lived on. The first philosopher from this period to provide a rigorous account of the connection between essence and modality appears to be G. E. Moore. In his famous paper *External and Internal Relations*, he defines what it is for a property to be internal (which I take to be the same as the property's being essential): P is *internal* to A just in case "(x = A) entails xP" (p. 293) or, equivalently, just in case the material implication (x=A) $\rightarrow$ xP is a necessary truth (p. 302). Moore is also remarkably sympathetic to discussions of internality and provides various interesting examples of internal and external properties throughout his writings.

However, it is only in the last twenty years or so that the modal approach to essentialist metaphysics has really come into its own. For with the advent of quantified modal logic, philosophers have been in a better position to formulate essentialist claims; and with clarification of the underlying modal notions, they have been better able to ascertain their truth. These developments have also had a significant impact on our understanding of metaphysics. For there would appear to be nothing special about the modal character of essentialist claims beyond their being de re. It therefore appears reasonable to treat the metaphysics of identity as merely part of a broader study of modality de re. The subject becomes, in effect, a part of applied modal logic.

It is my aim in this paper to show that the contemporary assimilation of essence to modality is fundamentally misguided and that, as a consequence, the corresponding conception of metaphysics should be given up. It is not my view that the modal account fails to capture anything which might reasonably be called a concept of essence. My point, rather, is that the notion of essence which is of central importance to the metaphysics of identity is not to be understood in modal terms or even to be regarded as extensionally equivalent to a modal notion. The one notion is, if I am right, a highly refined version of the other; it is like a sieve which performs a similar function but with a much finer mesh.

I shall also argue that the traditional assimilation of essence to definition is better suited to the task of explaining what essence is. It may not provide us with an analysis of the concept, but it does provide us with a good model of how the concept works. Thus my overall position is the reverse of the usual one. It sees real definition rather than de re modality as central to our understanding of the concept.

Let us turn first to the modal account. There are somewhat different ways the account can go. At its very simplest, it takes an object to have a property essentially just in case it is necessary that the object has the property. But there are two variants on the basic account, which make the necessary possession of

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the property conditional on something else. One variant makes the necessary possession conditional on existence: an object is taken to have a property essentially just in case it is necessary that the object has the property if it exists. The other variant makes the necessary possession conditional upon identity: an object is taken to have a property essentially just in case it is necessary that the object has the property if it is identical to that very object.

The last formulation is, in effect, the account proposed by Moore. However, it might be argued that, properly viewed, it should be identified with one of the two other formulations. For either the identity of an object with itself has existential import, in which case there is a collapse to the second, or it is without existential import, in which case there is a collapse to the first.

Even before we embark on a detailed criticism of these accounts, we should note that there is something suspicious about them. For we have an informal way of saying that an object essentially has a certain property. We say 'the object must have that property if it is to be the object that it is'. Somehow this form of words manages to convey what we wish to convey. But how? And how, in particular, are we to understand the role of the qualifying phrase 'if it is to be the object that it is'?

We can think of the various modal accounts as providing us with an answer to this question. On the categorical account, the qualification is taken to be redundant. But then why is it made? Under one version of the conditional account, the phrase is taken to convey existence. But then why is the existence of the object expressed so perversely in terms of identity? Under the other version of the of the conditional account, the phrase conveys a vacuous condition. But then, again, why is the qualification made and whence our feeling that it points to something significant?

We do not have here an argument against the modal accounts. But it is hard, all the same, to avoid the suspicion that they are somehow based upon a misreading of the standard informal way of expressing essentialist claims.

Let us now turn to the detailed considerations. My objection to the modal accounts will be to the sufficiency of the proposed criterion, not to its necessity. I accept that if an object essentially has a certain property then it is necessary that it has the property (or has the property if it exist); but I reject the converse. For the time being, we shall confine our attention to the existentially conditioned form of the criterion. Once the objection is developed for this form, it will be clear how it is to be extended to the categorical form.

Consider, then, Socrates and the set whose sole member is Socrates. It is then necessary, according to standard views within modal set theory, that Socrates belongs to singleton Socrates if he exists; for, necessarily, the singleton exists if Socrates exists and, necessarily, Socrates belongs to singleton Socrates if both Socrates and the singleton exist. It therefore follows according to the modal criterion that Socrates essentially belongs to singleton Socrates.

But, intuitively, this is not so. It is no part of the essence of Socrates to

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belong to the singleton. Strange as the literature on personal identity may be, it has never been suggested that in order to understand the nature of a person one must know to which sets he belongs. There is nothing in the nature of a person, if I may put it this way, which demands that he belongs to this or that set or which demands, given that the person exists, that there even be any sets.

It is not critical to the example that appeal be made to an abstract entity. Consider two objects whose natures are unconnected, say Socrates and the Eiffel Tower. Then it is necessary that Socrates and the Tower be distinct. But it is not essential to Socrates that he be distinct from the Tower; for there is nothing in his nature which connects him in any special way to it.

Nor is it critical to the example that the reader actually endorse the particular modal and essentialist claims to which I have made appeal. All that is necessary is that he should recognize the intelligibility of a position which makes such claims. For any reasonable account of essence should not be biased towards one metaphysical view rather than the other. It should not settle, as a matter of definition, any issue which we are inclined to regard as a matter of substance.

I am aware, though, that there may be readers who are so in the grip of the modal account of essence that they are incapable of understanding the concept in any other way. One cannot, of course, argue a conceptually blind person into recognizing a conceptual distinction, any more than one can argue a colour blind person into recognizing a colour distinction. But it may help such a reader to reflect on the difference between saying that singleton Socrates essentially contains Socrates and saying that Socrates essentially belongs to singleton Socrates. For can we not recognize a sense of nature, or of "what an object is", according to which it lies in the nature of the singleton to have Socrates as a member even though it does not lie in the nature of Socrates to belong to the singleton?

Once we recognize the asymmetry between these two cases, we have the means to present the objection. For no corresponding modal asymmetry can be made out. If the singleton essentially contains Socrates, then it is necessary that Socrates belongs to the singleton if the singleton exists. Granted that it is necessary that the singleton exists if Socrates does, it follows that it is necessary that Socrates belongs to the singleton if Socrates exists. But then Socrates essentially belongs to the singleton, which is the conclusion we wished to avoid.

The modal account is subject to further difficulties. For consider any necessary truth; it could be a particular mathematical truth, for example, or even the conjunction of all necessary truths. Then it is necessarily the case that this truth should hold if Socrates exists. But it is no part of Socrates' essence that there be infinitely many prime numbers or that the abstract world of numbers, sets, or what have you, be just as it is.

Among the necessary truths, if our modal theorist is to be believed, are statements of essence. For a statement of essence is a statement of necessity and

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so it will, like any statement of necessity, be necessarily true if it is true at all. It follows that it will part of the essence of any object that every other object has the essential properties that it has: it will be part of the essence of the Eiffel Tower for Socrates to be essentially a person with certain parents, let us say, or part of the essence of Socrates for the Eiffel Tower to be essentially spatio-temporally continuous. O happy metaphysician! For in discovering the nature of one thing, he thereby discovers the nature of all things.

The second of our two objections applies directly to the categorical account. The first also applies under either of two modifications. One possibility is to use necessary existents in place of contingent existents. Thus we may talk of 2 and singleton 2 rather than of Socrates and singleton Socrates. The other possibility is to make the attributed property conditional upon existence. Thus instead of asking whether Socrates is essentially a member of singleton Socrates, we ask whether he is essentially a member of the singleton *if he exists*. Under each of these two proposals, the difference between the conditional and categorical accounts disappears while the discrepancy with the essentialist claims remains.

In addition to the difficulties which are common to the two forms of the modal account, there is a difficulty which is peculiar to the conditional form. Consider Socrates again: it is necessarily the case that he exists if he exists. But we do not want to say that he essentially exists.

This difficulty has been recognized before, but I do not think that its significance has been properly appreciated. For existence is not an isolated example; there are many other cases of this sort. If, for instance, there is nothing in the nature of Socrates which demands that he exists, then presumably there is nothing in the nature of Socrates which demands that his parents exist. However, it is necessary (we may suppose) that his parents exist if Socrates does.

One can understand what motivates the conditional form of the account. For the categorical form provides us, in effect, with a vacuous interpretation of the qualifying phrase "if the object is to be the object that it is". This is clearly too weak. The conditional account can therefore be seen as an attempt to provide us with a more substantive interpretation of the phrase.

Unfortunately, the resulting interpretation is too strong. This is most simply seen, as we did above, by asking whether existence is an essential property of any object; for whatever property we take the phrase to attribute to the object must be an essential property of that object. But, of course, once one non-essential property is countenanced many others will follow as necessary consequences of it.

There is no obvious way around any of the above difficulties. To get round the first difficulty, one might try to add a condition of relevance to the modal criterion. One would demand, if a property is to be essential to an object, that it somehow be relevant to the object. However, the case of Socrates and his singleton makes it hard to see how the required notion of relevance could be understood without already presupposing the concept of essence in question. For

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we want to say that it is essential to the singleton to have Socrates as a member, but that it is not essential to Socrates to be a member of the singleton. But there is nothing in the "logic" of the situation to justify an asymmetric judgement of relevance; the difference lies entirely in the nature of the objects in question.

To get round the second difficulty, one might make the additional demand on an essential property that it not be an essential property, in the original sense, of every object whatever. The counterexamples which were constructed from necessary truths would then be overturned. But these examples could be readily reinstated by conjoining the given degenerate essential property with one which was not degenerate.

Nor does it help here to impose a condition of relevance, as in the first case. For I assume that we do not want to impose a general ban on "improper" properties being essential; we might be happy to say, for example, that it is essential to the null set that there be sets. And it would be possible, in any case, to construct related counter-examples using "proper" properties.

It is important to appreciate that the problem cases here do not simply arise from the requirement that the essential properties of an object be closed under logical consequence. For even with this requirement is in force, we would not want to say that it is essential to Socrates that the various necessary truths (as opposed to logical truths) be the case. Thus the problem is not an instance of the familiar problem of "logical omniscience".

To get round the third difficulty, one might suppose that the term 'essentially' is being used ambiguously, having a categorical meaning in application to properties like existence and having a conditional meaning in the other cases. There are, however, no independent reasons for believing in such an ambiguity. We have no "feeling" when we say that Socrates is essentially a man but not essentially existent that there has been a shift in the use of the term. If the term had these two senses, then there should be a sense in which Socrates was not essentially a man (in addition to the sense in which he is essentially a man). But there appears to be no such sense.

A sophisticated variant of this defence would make 'essentiality' disjunctive rather than ambiguous. Thus it would be supposed that in saying that an object essentially had a certain property we were claiming that either the property is existence-like and the object has the property essentially in the categorical sense or the property is not existence-like and the object has the property essentially in the conditional sense. But such a view is ad hoc. Why should the essentiality of existence consist in anything different from the essentiality of other properties?

The double standard also leads, as one might have expected, to incoherence. For what drives us to submit the property of being a man to the conditional criterion is the belief that it is impossible for something to be a man without existing. It would then seem to follow that the property of being an existent man should also submit to the conditional criterion; for this latter property merely makes explicit the existential commitment which is implicit in the

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former property. Granted that Socrates is essentially a man, we should therefore accept that Socrates is essentially an existent man. But how can Socrates be essentially an existent man without also being essentially existent?

Nor is it clear how the double standard is to be generalized so as to exclude the other troublesome cases, such as the one concerning the existence of Socrates' parents.

Thus the difficulties are not to be avoided. But might there not be some other, perhaps quite different, version of the modal criterion which is not subject to these difficulties? Although it is hard to be definitive on such a matter, I think it can plausibly be made out that no such alternative account is to found. For it seems to be possible to agree on all of the modal facts and yet disagree on the essentialist facts. But if any modal criterion of essence were correct, such a situation would be impossible.

Consider, for example, the mind-body problem. What is the relationship between a person, his body and his mind? We can imagine two philosophers agreeing on the modal facts; they accept that a person, his body and his mind are all distinct, that it is necessary that a person have just one body and one mind and that a mind or body belong to just one person, that a person necessarily has the mind and body that he has (if he exists) and that a mind or body necessarily belong to the person that they belong to (if they exist), and so on. But all the same, they may disagree on the essential properties of persons, bodies and minds. For the one philosopher may think of the body and the mind as some kind of abstraction from a person. For him therefore it is of the essence of a body or of a mind to belong to the person that they belong to, though not of the essence of a person to have the body or mind that he has. The other philosopher, though, may think of a person and his mind as some kind of abstraction from the body. For him therefore it will be of the essence of a person and mind to belong to the body that they belong to, though not of the essence of a body to belong to the person or the mind.

If no modal account of essence is possible, then this is important for our understanding of the metaphysics of identity. For it shows that even when all questions of necessity have been resolved, questions of their source will remain. The example shows further that these questions will not always be unproblematic; they may raise real issues. Thus the subject should not be taken to be constituted, either in principle or practice, by its claims of necessity.

Why has the modal criterion let us down so badly? What is it about the concept of necessity which makes it so inappropriate for understanding the concept of essence?

Certainly, there is a connection between the two concepts. For any essentialist attribution will give rise to a necessary truth; if certain objects are essentially related then it is necessarily true that the objects are so related (or necessarily true given that the objects exist). However, the resulting necessary

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truth is not necessary simpliciter. For it is true in virtue of the identity of the objects in question; the necessity has its source in those objects which are the subject of the underlying essentialist claim.

Thus different essentially induced truths may have their source in the identities of different objects—Socrates being a man having its source in the identity of Socrates, 2 being a number having its source in the identity of 2. In particular, an induced truth which concerns various objects may have its source in the nature of some of these objects but not of others. This is how it is with our standard example of Socrates being a member of singleton Socrates; for this is true in virtue of the identity of singleton Socrates, but not of the identity of Socrates.

The concept of metaphysical necessity, on the other hand, is insensitive to source: all objects are treated equally as possible grounds of necessary truth; they are all grist to the necessitarian mill. What makes it so easy to overlook this point is the confusion of subject with source. One naturally supposes, given that a subject-predicate proposition is necessary, that the subject of the proposition is the source of the necessity. One naturally supposes, for example, that what makes it necessary that singleton 2 contains (or has the property of containing) the number 2 is something about the singleton. However, the concept of necessity is indifferent to which of the many objects in a proposition is taken to be its subject. The proposition that singleton 2 contains 2 is necessary whether or not the number or the set is taken to be the subject of the proposition.

Given the insensitivity of the concept of necessity to variations in source, it is hardly surprising that it is incapable of capturing a concept which is sensitive to such variation. Each object, or selection of objects, makes its own contribution to the totality of necessary truths; and one can hardly expect to determine from the totality itself what the different contributions were. One might, in this respect, compare the concept of necessity to the concept of communal belief, i.e. to the concept of what is believed by some member of a given community. It would clearly be absurd to attempt to recover what a given individual believes from what his community believes. But if I am right, there is a similar absurdity involved in attempting to recover the essential properties of things from the class of necessary truths.

Indeed, it seems to me that far from viewing essence as a special case of metaphysical necessity, we should view metaphysical necessity as a special case of essence. For each class of objects, be they concepts or individuals or entities of some other kind, will give rise to its own domain of necessary truths, the truths which flow from the nature of the objects in question. The metaphysically necessary truths can then be identified with the propositions which are true in virtue of the nature of all objects whatever[1].

Other familiar concepts of necessity (though not all of them) can be understood in a similar manner. The conceptual necessities can be taken to be the propositions which are true in virtue of the nature of all concepts; the logical

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necessities can be taken to be the propositions which are true in virtue of the nature of all logical concepts; and, more generally, the necessities of a given discipline, such as mathematics or physics, can be taken to be those propositions which are true in virtue of the characteristic concepts and objects of the discipline.

I turn now to the connection between essence and definition. One of the ways the connection reveals itself is through a systematic analogy between necessity and analyticity, on the one hand, and essence and meaning, on the other; as essence is to necessity, so is meaning to analyticity.

An analytic truth is commonly taken to be a sentence which is true in virtue of the meaning of terms. But if there is an intelligible notion of a sentence being true in virtue of the meaning of all terms, it is natural to suppose that there is an intelligible notion of a sentence being true in virtue of certain terms as opposed to others. Consider the familiar example 'all bachelors are unmarried men'. It is plausible that this sentence is true in virtue of the meaning of the term 'bachelor' but not in virtue of the meanings of the terms 'unmarried' and 'man'.

The possibility of relativizing analyticity becomes even more apparent under the traditional explication of the notion. For under this explication, the meaning of a term is identified with a set of defining sentences and the relation between the meanings of the terms, as so understood, and the given sentence is taken be logical consequence. The analytic sentences are thus the logical consequences of the totality of definitions.

But in that case, the sentences true in virtue of the meanings of certain selected terms may be taken to be the logical consequences of the definitions of those terms. The sentence 'all bachelors are unmarried men', for example, will be analytic in 'bachelor' since it follows from the definition of 'bachelor' as 'unmarried man', while the sentence will not be analytic in 'unmarried' and 'man', since there are no legitimate definitions of these terms from which it follows.

We therefore have a direct analogy with the relativized form of necessity. Just as a necessary truth may be true in virtue of the identity of certain objects as opposed to others, so an analytic truth may be true in virtue of the meanings of certain terms as opposed to others.

One might, of course, be sceptical of the intuitions upon which such a distinction rests. One might think that the sentence 'all bachelors are unmarried men' is no more true in virtue of the meaning of the term 'bachelor' than of the terms 'unmarried' and 'man', or that if it is legitimate to define 'bachelor' as 'unmarried man' then it is equally legitimate to define 'unmarried' as 'bachelor or spinster' or 'man' as 'bachelor or husband'. One might even be some sort of semantical holist and think that the meaning of one term cannot properly be separated from the meaning of any other term. I do not myself find these views plausible; it seems quite clear to me, for example, that the concept of marital

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status is not all involved in the concept of being a man. However, just as in the essentialist case, the important issue concerns intelligibility rather than truth. We want to know if there could be a genuine difference of opinion as to whether 'man' is correctly definable as 'bachelor or husband' or as to whether some form of holism is correct; and when the point is put in this way, it seems hard to see how it could be denied.

Granted the intelligibility of the relativized form of analyticity, the question arises as to whether it can be explained in other terms; and we find that, just as there have been those who have attempted to explain the concept of essence in terms of necessity, so there have been those who have attempted to explain the concept of meaning in terms of analyticity. They have thought, for example, that synonymy between expression might be defined as an appropriate form of analytic equivalence and that the meaning of a term might then be identified with the class of its synonyms.

But the attempt to reduce meaning to analyticity is as futile as the attempt to reduce essence to necessity. For an adequate account of meaning must at least explain when a sentence is true in virtue of the meanings of certain terms as opposed to others; it must provide us with a satisfactory account of relativized analyticity. But how is this to be done? Consider the case of the term 'bachelor'. We want the sentence 'something is a bachelor iff it is an unmarried man' to be true in virtue of the meaning of 'bachelor'. But what for our reductionist can render it true in virtue of the meaning of the term beyond the fact that it is analytic? It would appear that he can only appeal at this point to the further fact that the sentence has the form of an explicit definition. Thus he must maintain that any analytic sentence of the form 'something is a P iff ...' will be true in virtue of the meaning of the predicate P.

But such a view leads to absurdity. For it would follow that the sentence 'something is a bachelor iff it as an unmarried man and all triangles are three sided' is true in virtue of the meaning of 'bachelor'. Yet surely it is no part of our understanding of 'bachelor' that something should be a bachelor only when all triangles have three sides.

Indeed, under the proposed view the distinction between the different relativizations virtually disappears. For let P be a one-place predicate (similar considerations apply to the other cases); and let A be an arbitrary analytic truth. Then 'for all x, Px iff (Px iff A)' is analytic and hence true in virtue of the meaning of P. But A is a logical consequence of this sentence and hence presumably also true in virtue of the meaning of P. Thus we reach the ridiculous conclusion that someone who knows the meaning of one term (in so far as it can be given by an explicit definition) thereby knows the meaning of all terms.

Nor does any other definition of the relative in terms of the absolute notion appear to be available. For just as it appeared to be possible to agree on the modal facts and yet disagree on the essentialist facts, so it appears to be possible to agree on the facts of analyticity and yet disagree on the facts of meaning. A

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plausible case can perhaps be constructed around the claim, familiar from discussions of personal identity, that a person can only remember his own experiences. Some philosophers have thought that the sentence expressing this claim is true in virtue of the meaning of 'remember'; to remember an experience, if one is a person, is to "quasi-remember" an experience which is yours. Others have thought that the sentence is true in virtue of the meaning of 'person'; to be a person is, at least in part, to be a being which only remembers its own experiences. It is not clear that these philosophers need differ over what they take to be analytic; and if this is so, we would then have a case of the desired sort.

These considerations are relevant to our understanding of semantics or "conceptual analysis". For they suggest that even when all questions of analyticity have been resolved, real issues as to their source will still remain. The study of semantics is no more exhausted by the claims of analyticity than is the metaphysics of identity exhausted by the claims of necessity.

The previous considerations are also relevant to the question of how one should understand the traditional account of analyticity. Under this account, it will be recalled, the notion of analytic truth was understood in terms of the notion of definitional truth; the analytic truths were taken to be the logical consequences of the definitional truths. But how are we to understand the notion of a definitional truth? Let us suppose, for simplicity, that all of the definitional truths are explicit in form; one thing is defined as another. Then how should we understand the relationship between the definiendum and the definiens?

The only answer available to the reductionist was that the two should be synonyms; the corresponding biconditional, or what have you, should be analytic. But if this is the case, then it is hard to see what the traditional account achieves. It is, for one thing, unnecessarily complicated. Quine himself has pointed out, in section 5 of *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, that, once equipped with the notion of synonymy, we can define an analytic truth as one that is synonymous with a logical truth. But we can do better than that. For fixing on any particular analytic truth S_0, we can define an analytic truth to be any sentence synonymous with S_0. (Alternatively, we can define an analytic truth T to be one synonymous with 'if T then T'). Thus there is not even any need to appeal to the notion of logical truth.

But, more significantly, we must give up the traditional idea that the logical derivation of an analytic statement from the definitions of its terms constitutes an analysis of that statement, one which may enable us to see that it is true. For there is nothing in the underlying conception of definitional truth which will force the resulting derivations to be analyses in any meaningful sense of the term. Indeed, as far as this conception goes, one might as well extract any predicate P from the given analytic statement and use the artificial "definition" above to provide it with a trivial pseudo-analysis.

These difficulties are avoided if we require the definitional truths which figure in the account of analyticity to be true in virtue of the meanings of their

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defined terms. For the account is then as about as direct as it could be; and real content is given to the idea of analysis. The given analytic statement is derived from definitions which in a significant sense provide one with the meanings of the individual terms.

We have seen that there exists a certain analogy between defining a term and giving the essence of an object; for the one results in a sentence which is true in virtue of the meaning of the term, while the other results in a proposition which is true in virtue of the identity of the object. However, I am inclined to think that the two cases are not merely parallel but are, at bottom, the same.

For what is involved in giving a definition? What makes it correct, for example, to define 'bachelor' as 'unmarried man'? On one common view it is an empirical fact about linguistic usage that 'bachelor' means what it does and hence is correctly definable as unmarried man. But this is to accept a particular conception of a word as a mere sequence of letters. On a thicker and perhaps more natural conception, a word would be constituted in part by its meaning. There would thus be two words 'bank' in English, one meaning river bank and the other meaning money bank.

Under this alternative conception, what would be an empirical fact is that the word, or a token of it, existed. But given the word, it would be essential that it meant what it did. A definition, on this view, would therefore state an essential property of the word.

But there is a deeper connection between definition and the formulation of essence which can still be made out, even when we drop the thicker conception of what a word is. For in attempting to define a term, such as 'bachelor', we are attempting to specify its meaning. But not every specification of the meaning is appropriate. We cannot properly say that the meaning of 'bachelor' is the one most often referred to in the recent philosophical literature on analyticity. We should not even say that the meaning of 'bachelor' is the same as the meaning of the phrase 'unmarried man' (which is the form of locution preferred by Quine); for, strictly speaking, it is irrelevant to the meaning of 'bachelor' that the phrase 'unmarried man' means what it does.

So what is an appropriate specification of the meaning? The only satisfactory answer appears to be that the specification should make clear what the meaning (essentially) is; it should provide us, that is to say, with some account of the meaning's essence. Thus we find again that in giving a definition we are giving an essence—though not now of the word itself, but of its meaning.

Of course, even if this is correct, the essentialist engagement is only with meanings. But there are many philosophers who would be happy with the idea that one can say what a meaning or concept is, at least in the sense of providing it with an analysis, but who would balk at the thought that one can in a comparable sense say what an *object* is. On their view, it is only concepts or

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meanings which can be defined, not objects.

The difficulty with this position is to see what is so special about concepts. It is granted that the concept bachelor may be defined as unmarried man; this definition states, in the significant essentialist sense, what the concept *is*. But then why is it not equally meaningful to define a particular set in terms of its members or to define a particular molecule of water in terms of its atomic constituents? Why is the one any more a definition or account of what the object is than the others?

Indeed, I believe that what is properly regarded as a definition of an object is sometimes treated as a definition of a concept or of a word, presumably because of some prejudice against real definition. A case in point is the definition of the numerals as they are found in natural language. It is supposed that the numeral '1' should be defined as 'the successor of 0', the numeral '2' as 'the successor of 1', and so on. But why is this view taken to be so plausible? Why could one not, with equal or greater plausibility, understand the numeral '1' independently of the numeral '0', or define '12' as 'the sum of 10 and 2'? I suspect that what these philosophers really have in mind is that the number 1 is to be defined as the successor of 0 and that this thought is then transferred, without regard for the linguistic evidence, from the number to the numeral. We therefore have a reversal of what is usually regarded as the traditional mistake in this area; the definition is illegitimately transferred, not from the word to the object, but from the object to the word.

If I am right, there is more to the idea of real definition than is commonly conceded. For the activities of specifying the meaning of a word and of stating what an object is are essentially the same; and hence each of them has an equal right to be regarded as a form of definition[2].

Notes

1. This account of necessity has been anticipated by Husserl. In the third of the *Logical Investigations*, section 7, he describes the necessity relevant to his discussion as an "a priori necessity rooted in the essences of things". I do not follow him in treating the necessity in question as a priori or in taking the essences of things to be universal; and he does not follow me in treating the account as a definition of one notion in terms of another. But still, the underlying idea is the same.
2. This paper was presented as the second *Philosophical Perspectives* Lecture at California State University, Northridge in the Fall of 1992. I am grateful to James Tomberlin and his colleagues for the occasion. Other versions have been given elsewhere; and I should like to thank the members of the different philosophical audiences for their valuable comments. The ideas behind the paper go back to two unpublished sets of notes on identity and on necessity, respectively.

   Some points of contact with the recent literature should be noted. Wiggins, in his paper *The De Re Must* ... and elsewhere, argues against what I have called the modal account of essentialist claims. But the point of his arguments is quite different from my own. He wishes to claim that the de re modal statement does

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not give the correct logical form of an essentialist attribution. But he would be perfectly prepared to concede, given a suitable understanding of necessity, that the two were extensionally, and perhaps even analytically, equivalent. My concern, however, is to argue against the equivalence of the two.

Almog's *The What and the How* is closer in theme to the present paper. He introduces the notion of a primal truth, i.e. of a "truth in actuality solely in virtue of what the subject is" (p. 226); and this notion seems to be like my notion of a proposition's being true in virtue of the identity of certain objects. But the following major disparities between the two notions and between our treatments of them should be noted. (1) The qualification "in actuality" seems to bear some force which makes the two intuitive notions different. For whereas it is a primal truth that Socrates exists, this is not something true in virtue of the identity of Socrates; and nor is existence, at least according to the traditional conception of essence, any part of the essence of Socrates. (2) Almog takes primality to be a property of truths. Given any truth, he extracts the subject (and presumably the subjects, if there is more than one) and asks whether the truth is true solely in virtue of what the subject (or subjects) are. On the other hand, my notion is a relativized property. Given any proposition and any objects (which may or may not be subjects of the proposition), I ask whether it is true in virtue of the identity of those objects. The relativized notion gives us much greater flexibility in saying what we want to say. We may distinguish, for example, between the proposition that Socrates is a member of singleton Socrates being true in virtue of the singleton but not true in virtue of Socrates. It is not clear on Almog's approach how such distinctions are to be expressed; and I doubt that the kinds of notion we are both trying to get at should be regarded as yet another property of truths, alongside necessity, aprioricity and the like. (3) We both argue against our notions being modal; but the arguments are quite different. Mine depend critically upon there being two or more "subjects". His do not; and it is not clear to me, for this reason, that they are as compelling. (4) We understand the connection between our notions and necessity differently. I take a metaphysical necessity to be a proposition true in virtue of the identity of all objects. However, he supposes that some primal truths are not metaphysically necessary and views the two as somehow operating in different conceptual spheres. (5) Almog gives an analogue of the modal account of essence; for he takes P to be a primal trait of x iff "it has to be actually true that, if x exists, x is P" (p. 230). Now I assume that the operator 'it has to be actually true that' is subject-indifferent, at least to the extent of conforming to certain weak modal principles. But then my objections against the modal account of essence will also apply to this account of primal trait. I might also add that there is a difficulty in knowing how this elucidation is to be understood. For either it has to be actually true that Socrates exists or this is not the case. (It is not completely clear to me from the paper what Almog would want to say on this question). If it is the case, then the antecedent expression 'if x exists' is redundant and the elucidation does no work. If it is not the case, then the operator would appear to express a more fundamental concept and the elucidation would actually constitute an analysis of primal truth in terms of this more fundamental concept.

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